PENNSYLVANIA WRITING PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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Pat Parnell, Northern Virginia Writing Project
"The Subject of the Sentence Is . . ."

Pat Parnell, a teacher/consultant from the Northern Virginia Writing Project, addressed the members of the Pennsylvania Writing Project on December 6, 1980 at West Chester State College.

Parnell spoke about sentence-modeling and sentence-combining as techniques for improving the clarity of writing. "Writing is a dialogue between author and reader," she proposed. "The reader follows syntactical clues to determine meaning and relationships." To demonstrate her teaching techniques, she led the group through several writing activities she uses in her classes in J.E.B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Parnell first used Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God* to show how modeling differed from paraphrase. A model is meant to be followed as accurately as possible. Paraphrasing develops comprehension, but modeling develops skill in the art of composing by encouraging the imitation of sentence structures of professional writers.

The second technique described by Parnell and explored by the group was sentence-combining. Sentences which had been broken down into briefer "kernels" were recombined by the group and compared with the authors' original sentences.

Finally the group reversed this technique to examine problem sentences they contributed from their students' writing — breaking each sentence into its component ideas, determining its controlling idea, then recombining to produce a sentence with improved clarity and style.

Throughout her presentation Parnell emphasized a simple idea which she had had to discover for herself but which she felt should be a commonplace for all English teachers. To improve clarity "the subject (content) of the sentence should be the subject (grammatical) of the sentence."

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Writing Process Researcher Visits PWP
by
Janet Greco

Lucy McCormick Calkins met with the Pennsylvania Writing Project on February 7 in the West Chester State College Library. Under a three-year grant from the National Institute of Education, Calkins has worked with Donald Graves and Susan Sowers at the Writing Process Lab at the University of New Hampshire to observe and analyze the writing processes of young children. Like Sowers, who visited the Project's 1980 Summer Institute, Calkins spoke about their research and showed video-tapes of young children writing, commenting about their writing, and engaged in conferences with teachers or researchers about their writing.

Calkins talked to PWP Fellows and their guests on teaching the writing process. She noted the difficulty of applying a process orientation in a "first-draft society" plagued by the inflation of the curriculum, the view of writing as simple transcription of thought, and traditional teacher-directed learning. Time allocation, experimentation, and conferencing, said Calkins, are keys to overcoming these problems.

We are always being asked to teach more, yet are not given more time with students. Since the best process of composing requires uninterrupted, sustained, secure blocks of time, the teacher must be the bulwark against a sea of content and provide students with space and time to think, write, and consider. Students must be writing throughout the year. At first, large clumps of time should be available every day; afterward, writing time can be reduced to two days a week. In a fourth grade, Calkins suggested that an hour and twenty minutes, perhaps after recess and beginning with ten or fifteen minutes of quiet reading, will capture and channel student energy. Conferences can also be held during this time.

The rules and equipment for a process-oriented writing classroom are simple and standard (recall Donald Murray). Folders are given out. Everyone must write. Nothing is on desks but paper and writing implement. Choice of topics, genres, pens and paper belongs to the student.

Writing is followed by a "share meeting," also with procedural rules. No pencils. No work on desks unless it is to be shared. Everyone must listen to the three or four students requested by the teacher to share work. Each sharer begins by saying where he is in the writing process. The teacher shows the audience how to comment well and to pursue a line of questioning.

This teaching strategy can be used for all types of writing activities, as in the content areas. Children knowing the externals can focus on the process of composing and can, with greater security, learn to experiment. It is important to introduce children to the flexibility of language, to let them learn what their options are. Use the

word "drafting" to instill a feeling of tentativeness with any given copy. Eliminate dictionaries; encourage messiness and productive chaos by forbidding erasures; get scissors, tape, glue, large paper — tools for cutting and pasting. Attend to the stages: grade drafts, play with failed attempts. Honor experiments by hanging successive drafts on the board. Force students, for example, to try out several leads or a backwards draft. Give a piece of editing information to one student "in confidence" to seed the group.

Beside providing structure, then, the teacher must, as a model, enjoy the atmosphere which allows the student to find more of his own resources and which gives him the courage to explore and experiment in writing. The teacher must be brave enough to refuse to do those things which look like help but which ultimately control and foster dependence. Conferencing aims to teach the student to be his own critic.

Keep conference questions consistently aimed at eliciting a student writer's priorities and goals. "Tell me about the squirrel." "What here is most interesting to you?" Do not respond to requests for spelling or other information. Affirm their questions, mirror concern but do not "hook" them into going to the teacher for answers. Get them to read back their text, to identify where they are in the process. Show how to expand with questions about specifics. Finally, avoid compliments. Writers all tend to retain those parts which another person likes. Thus they lose control over their own writing.

In sum, the teacher aims to make the student the final arbiter of her own work. The student chooses her topic, she finds the form to match the content, she examines the text, she determines its readiness for evaluation. Through clear, consistent procedure, the teacher creates an environment in which the messiness and risk of writing are safely exploited to their best end: the training of young writers in healthy writing process.

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MUSINGS OF A MOTHER

We walk along the streambank
The lush verdure hampers us.
Something important I should say to you.
We comment on the nettles' sting.

You pause, edge your feet into the water
Wiggle your toes and shiver.
I would like to join you
The effort is too great.

A dragonfly darts and halts
and darts again about your head.
The perils of life I should share with you.
The color your new dress will be, we discuss instead.

You step from stone to stone
Raise your long hair off your shoulders
I would like to tell you that I love you.
We agree your hair should have a trim.

You pluck a bloodroot from the bank.
It bleeds a crimson stain upon your hand.
I laugh away the omen.
Hand in hand, we wander home again.

— Pat Groves
Octorara School District

Project News

Congratulations to Bob Weiss on publication of his article, "Writing in the Total Curriculum: A Program for Cross-Disciplinary Cooperation" in *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition,* a book, recently published by the National Council of Teachers of English. The book intended mainly for college and secondary teachers, contains essays on various aspects of teaching the writing process by Don Murray, Stephen Judy, Harvey Wiener, and others.

Recommended for your library.

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Under a grant from the State Department of Education to the Chester and Montgomery County Intermediate Units, Project CARES is running eight sessions related to "basic skills." Most of the people attending will be building principals and curriculum specialists. The March 23rd session will be on the Pennsylvania Writing Project and will be led by Bob Weiss, Janet Greco, and Doris Gabel. Other sessions include Gary Gerbrant on working with small groups and Jonathan Kozol on adult illiteracy.

The Delaware County Intermediate Unit, under a similar grant this Spring, is preparing 16½ hours of in-service sessions on reading and writing. PWP Fellows are involved in the planning of these activities.

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Over 55 teachers are participating in the PWP courses for Montgomery and Chester counties. Response to presentations has been highly favorable.

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On Saturday, March 7, the Project will play a significant part in the Delaware Valley Writing Council's Spring Conference at Temple University. The theme of the conference is "The Articulation of Writing Standards Between High School and College." Bob Weiss will moderate an afternoon session titled "Teaching the Student/Teaching the Standards." Panelists will be two PWP Fellows, Janet Greco and Martha Menz, Margot Soven of the English Department of LaSalle College and Harry Brent, Chairman of the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English. Dixie Goswami, who visited last summer's Institute, will be respondent. For further information on the conference, call the Project office.

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Awareness sessions about PWP are to be held February 13, 1981 for teachers in the Marple-Newton School District and February 23, 1981 for teachers in the Haverford School District. PWP Fellows scheduled to participate are Merle Horowitz, Doris Gabel, Joan Flynn, and Lois Snyder.

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The Ridley School District plans to videotape Jolene Borgese, one of her classes, and Bob Weiss in a program featuring PWP.

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Babi Yar

Edith Lefferts
Wallingford/Swarthmore School District

That morning Olga, our little Intourist guide, had led our tour group through St. Sophia's, Kiev's blue and gold thirteenth-century cathedral. Its floors were covered with gleaming black tiles depicting religious symbols in white relief. Every other octagonal block revealed either a crescent and a star or a six-pointed star. As we oohed and aahed at the extravagantly decorated flat icons, gold-leafed screens and alters, Olga's high-pitched voice described items of interest. She expertly drew our attention to the floors with their odd designs — strange, I thought, for a Russian orthodox church.

"The priests wanted to insure that only the true believers would enter their place of worship so they had symbols of the Muslim and Jewish faiths placed under foot. No Jews or Muslims would walk on them." Two couples and I exchanged quick glances, then moved on with the rest of the group to the catacombs. For a few steps I tried tip-toeing from one crescent-and-starred tile to another, but finally I gave up, concentrating on the artistic and cultural aspects of the cathedral. Still, I felt guilty of committing a sacrilege — something similar to the queasy feeling you get when you find you've unknowingly trod on someone's grave.

In the afternoon, following a refreshing sail on the Dnieper River by modern ferry, we filed onto our red and white Intourist bus. Our itinerary had listed a visit to Babi Yar, the infamous site of mass murders by Nazi troops during World War II. Since I had read Yevtushenko's poem about it, I was anticipating seeing the place, so I leaned forward in my seat, tapped Olga on the shoulder, and asked politely (one is *always* polite to Intourist guides) if this was the way to Babi Yar. She shook her head, tossing her Western-cut hair prettily and answered, "Eet ees not on our itinerary."

I replied, "It is listed on mine."

"Vell, eet ees *not* on *my* itinerary."

Silence.

Then she turned and added, "Baht *you* may go on your own." Cold smile.

"Good," I answered. Although Intourist was notorious for unpredicable and seemingly arbitrary switches in agendas, this was the first one we had experienced.

"Vee shall stop here and you can get a cab to go on." She spoke in crisp Russian to our bus driver and called to the rest of the group in English. "Anyvon who vishes to visit Babi Yar may disembark here."

The two couples who had shared looks with me in St. Sophia's ducked down the aisle of the bus, and we left.

Where were we? In the middle of town. In the middle of a patriotic celebration. Across the broad avenue was a square. Rows of brilliant red flags outlining the terraced war memorial. Masses of young people in white, soldiers at attention, citizens holding small bouquets of fresh flowers wrapped in wax paper. Red banners billowing from nearby chunky buildings. At the podium in the center, a noisy government official spoke into a microphone, circa 1930. A huge reddish stone figure of someone was rimmed with petrified soldiers in bronze. We joked that they stamped out thousands of identical statutes — just changed the heads to represent Lenin, Marx, or some other Revolutionary luminary.

Up the street away from the pageantry and rhetoric of the demonstration, we stomped, finding ourselves caught in late afternoon rush-hour pedestrian traffic. Much pushing and lining up at curbs. A street sign indicated a taxi stand. A line of ten people waited patiently for non-existent taxis, holding their ubiquitous string bags filled with whatever the shops dispensed that day. The Russians ignored us. After a brief unsure conference, we threaded along hoping for better luck at the next queue. More pushing and being pushed. Cameras swung from our necks, the universal stamp of the tourist.

One sharp-eyed member of our lost battalion spotted a cab and flagged it down. We congratulated ourselves on our luck as we piled in, the two couples in the back and me in the front next to the driver. He smiled. We smiled. Traffic flew all about us as we remained stationary in the black car.

"Babi Yar?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he answered, followed by a string of incomprehensible Russian.

I turned to him, pleading in one of my five words of Russian, "Please?"

We tried every language we knew — French, Spanish, Yiddish, and back to French again. The driver simply looked from one to another of us. If only we could communicate!

Finally, to our relief, he started off. "Babi Yar — dot vay," he announced. Delighted, we settled back to enjoy the scenery. We were tickled with ourselves. We'd gained a victory over the Russian system. Babi Yar, here we come.

The road was lined with rich chestnut trees, heavy with blossoms. Little by little the old apartment buildings of Kiev thinned. More trees. Fewer houses. Deeper shadows as the sun lowered.

I sneaked a look at the driver. A well-built man with thick, wavy dark hair, a little gray at the sideburns, a kindly rugged face. Ill-fitting gray suit. Strong hands. He looked back and flashed a smile. I waved my mental magic wand and saw him with a stylish haircut, blazer and slacks. Not bad, not bad.

The chestnuts became less orderly in their appearance. The cab pulled to the curb. "Here. Babi Yar." The driver swept his hand to the right.

I lifted my hand, fingers spread. "You wait here five minutes?"

He shook his head. Panic. Was he going to leave us out in the middle of nowhere? Or didn't he understand?

I frantically pointed to my watch. "Five minutes. Please."

"Hokay!"

We fell out of the cab and took sight of Babi Yar, a broad green clearing of several acres circled by black woods. Straight ahead of us a wide gravel path led to a long avenue of uneven granite steps. The sky hung blue above a magnificent bronze sculpture towering at the top of the steps. No sound but the birds twittering in the trees.

No one else was there but three generals — or they looked like generals to us. They walked ahead of us formally in measured steps, chests covered with bright grosgrain ribbons and medals. A few steps from the monument they stopped, laid a huge bouquet of carnations, saluted, turned smartly, and passed us on their way back to the street, stern-faced.

What *was* that sculpture? Pile of things. Not the usual monolithic figure with an interchangeable head. Closer and closer we came. Oh Lord, they were piles of people. People clinging frantically to one another, clinging to the ravine. Women in anguish clutching crying babies, children clawing at their mothers' skirts, horrified men protecting women with their bodies. Hear the silent screams?

The figures tumbled down the back of the sculpture in agony, down into the deep wide grassy ravine. Forty years ago Nazi soldiers had corralled unarmed Jews and Ukranian gypsies in that ravine. The uniformed soldiers stood above and swung their blurting machine guns repeatedly. The story was clear to all who came here.

I checked my watch. Our time was up. In the distance the driver lounged against the cab, occasionally polishing a spot with his sleeve. I flew back to ask him for more time.

Oddly enough his eyes were filled with tears, as were mine. "Jews. Gyeepsies." He made a machine gun of his hands and trilled his tongue mimicking the sounds. "Go — I vait." I nodded and swallowed hard.

Numb, we snapped tons of pictures. We were silent as we got into the cab for the return ride. One of the women in the back sobbed. The chestnuts cast long shadows over the emptied streets. Exhausted, we got out at our hotel.

* * * * *

POEM

House by the curve in the road
Sagging, leaning, peeling, rusted,
unshuttered.

Swelling place of ghosts ----
The surge of rediscovered feelings
The withdrawal of one who hurts.

You are stalwart through it all ----
Listening
Caring
Protecting
Hiding
those who look to you,
symbol of regret
and we who love you still.

— Suzanne Varhola
West Chester Area School District

* * * * *

Beginnings. . .

Kathryn Head
West Chester Area School District

I am, therefore I write.

The most startling concept I have encountered in this workshop is the notion that writing is a natural function of humans, along with thinking, listening and speaking, and that as teachers, we may have actually interfered with our students' writing processes. For many years, I have been upset by my inability to teach writing, despite all the elaborate lesson plans dealing with grammer, usage, topic sentences, paragraphs, expository compositions and research papers. I think now that I was doing things backwards. Like Alice, I want to climb through the lookingglass and re-examine my thinking about writing and teaching.

Pausing for reflection, I ask myself what I am doing. I am moving a ballpoint pen across a yellow piece of paper, following a blue line. Why? How? The fingers of my right hand, controlled by muscles and nerves, are following a pattern developed long ago in my brain. Not being a biologist, I can't comprehend what happens physiologically in the brain, so I try to understand metaphorically. The brain, early on in the developing embryo, is a spanking-new, echoing-empty computer, tabula rasa, full of neat little cubby holes, levers, and switches, oiled and ready to go. The first tiny messages come in from the developing nervous system as body parts develop, reaching out into the softness and warmth of the womb. Surviving the sense bombardment of birth, the computer begins to hum with activity as many impulses come from the new environment. From the myopic fuzz of newborn eyes, a face emerges, which becomes associated with feeling warm, nourished, secure. Sounds come from the mother's smiles and enter the ear canal. As the touches, sights and sounds are repeated and more cubbyholes are filled, the little levers begin to move, making connections between the cubbyholes. Meaning is born and thinking begins, both miracles that in turn demand purposeful listening. After the child has had a sufficient time for his brain to absorb a certain amount of information, a terrible need arises (why?) to reverse the flow of impulses so that the brain can respond to the environment. That mechanism used so far for crying, gurgling and blowing bubbles seems a pretty good way to return communication. Sounds start to approximate those from the outside and speaking begins. The communication process is complete. For about five years the computer whirs along, happily taking in, making connections, and spitting out. So far, so good.

Now I'm in trouble. I get up, get another cup of coffee, feed the dogs. How does writing fit into this so far natural process, my brain rehearses. I read over what I have written and desperately search for solutions. A scanner in my brain moves across those multitudinous cubbyholes now jammed full of junk, looking for certain bits of information, trying to make sense out of chaos. Thinking and speaking are certainly ways to force selection and organization of stored information, but writing seems to work better, forcing the brain to select and organize more carefully. When do I write? When I need to communicate something important, well thought-out, to be remembered. Speaking is important too, but more spontaneous, less permanent. Writing requires more of me by making me really think before I leap, reaching back into deeper levels of understanding and feeling. For ten years I have spoken matter-of-factly of my mother's death. Now when I write about it, unexpected impressions, sharp and sometimes painful, rise to the surface of awareness from the murky depths of the storage bank. Perhaps the actual motion of the hand as it is writing has something to do with the unlocking of the deeper levels in the brain.

I accept now the importance of writing and of my role as a writer. I understand a bit more about the writing process, having used myself as a case study. I still haven't answered the questions of writing as a natural process. What would have happened if I had not been taught to write? (I assume I was.) Would I have written anyway and perhaps have become a better writer, blooming like a rare flower in the desert air? What teachers, if any, interfered with the process and prevented me from becoming Joyce Maynard, if somewhat belatedly? I'll never know. I can only listen to and watch (and write about!) children in Susan Sowers' laboratory/classroom, writing without having been taught and speaking so elequently about their own writing processes. I can listen to Dixie Goswami, saying that writing is a natural process like listening and speaking. I might be able to find the time to do case studies of my students next year and make some hypotheses about the origin of writing. I can read the findings of researchers in the field. The inquiry has just begun; an answer may never

be found.

The importance of this exercise may lie in the fact that I am writing about writing, thereby selecting, evaluating, organizing data in the attempt to communicate to you my view of the writing process. I am at last practising what I have been preaching. How refreshing! Maybe now I'll have the courage to throw away "the outline," "the paragraph," "the comma," and turn my attention to what's going on inside my students as they write. Maybe if I can tune into myself and my students as writers, I will some day become a teacher of writing. I would like that.

I write, I teach; therefore I am.

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From teachers to students, from students to us

What Paul Diederich, Director of Testing at Educational Testing Service at Princeton, New Jersey, said of the parent Bay Area Writing Project also — we hope — applies to us:

[It] has stirred up English teachers to an extent that I have seldom if ever seen. I was closely involved in the work of some of the research and development centers established by Project English, but none of them started what one would call a "movement." I belive that the Bay Area Writing Project really has started a movement that is sweeping the country . . . With all my bias in favor of hard data, I am pretty sure that this is one of those ideas that will last.

Although we are pleased to accept this immodest exuberance on the part of a noted researcher in the field of writing, the truest evaluators of our work as writing teachers are our student writers. What do they learn, and how do they feel about what they learn? In addition to systematic and quantitative answers to these questions, we wanted to explore the context and depth of their learning and of their feelings about writing. The student testimony we present here is a small fraction of a constantly expanding commentary made by each student about his or her writing process or use of writing as a learning vehicle.

From Freema Nichols' (PWP Fellow 1980-81) 7th grade at Nether Providence Middle School, Wallingford/ Swarthmore School District:

I thought the book we all published was a good idea. It gave you a chance to read other people's writing and what they felt about something.

Laura Pike

I really like free writing and I wish we could have it more than twice a week. We have English, Math & Social Studies every day, why couldn't we have Writing Workship every day? You probably want to know why I like "W.W." so much, right? I think the main reason is because we can write whatever we want to, we don't have to worry about spelling or punctuation at first.

Jennifer Bell

I really enjoy this class. I enjoy using my imagination and listening to others. At this point I would hope this program would be in every school.

Tammie Glover

I'm real glad that right now we are starting to write letters to other people because I like it much better than writing whatever comes to your mind. I really enjoy this class.

Beth Petruuelli

Fron Janet Greco's (PWP Fellow 1980-81) 10th grade at Upper Dublin High School, Upper Dublin School District:

I've learned alot about me [by doing writing]. I never knew that I could make this stupid pen really work for me. In the past I hated writing essays. Everyone does sometimes . . . But most of all I've learned to enjoy writing which I never though I would.

Alan Witsen

The writing we did in class opened new doors for me. Before I didn't know that I could write because for one thing spelling holds me back from using words. So I would cut corners and not describe things the way I would like.

Brian McAleer

From Joan Flynn's (PWP Fellow 1980-81) 5th grade at Hillsdale Elementary School, West Chester Area School District.:

Helps me to get better grades.

Jennifer Poynter

It reminds me to proofread. I understand word problems better when I write my own.

Bryan McDermott

By writing in Math class I have learned to see what I have done wrong and how to stop making the same mistake. And it reminds me to go over and check my answer. I have learned how to do word problems better by writing my own.

Cindy Mahoney

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Ideas
Excitable, New
Exploring, Discovering, Investigating
Poems, Writing, Movement, Progress
Probing, Reflecting, Thinking
Positive, Reinforcement
Trials

Anonymous comment by a teacher participating in a PWP In-service activity

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Writing
Prewriting, rewriting, revising
Bombarded, engulfed, involved, exhausted
Learning

Poem from the Summer Institute
Freema Nichols
Nether Providence Middle School
Wallingford/Swarthmore School District

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I think I am doing a better job than I did before. My strength is that I am getting to the point where I understand what I am writing and how to go about writing it . . .

Debbie Mosetter, 10th grade
Upper Dublin High School
Upper Dublin School District

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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West Chester State College

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